

**RECORD OF TELEPHONE CONVERSATION
WITH
MS. NANCY CASEY
PASSENGER ON BOARD THE U.S. SMALL PASSENGER VESSEL
*PORT IMPERIAL MANHATTAN***

7 PAGES (INCLUDING COVER)



National Transportation Safety Board

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RECORD OF TELEPHONE CONVERSATION

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NAME OF PERSON INTERVIEWED: Ms. Nancy Casey
Hoboken, NJ

INTRODUCTION

I interviewed Ms. Nancy Casey in connection with the investigation of the fire on board the U.S. passenger vessel *Port Imperial Manhattan*, which occurred while the vessel was underway in the Hudson River near New York, NY on November 17, 2000. Ms. Casey was a passenger on board the vessel at the time that the fire broke out. The text that follows is not a verbatim record of my conversation with Ms. Casey. It has been constructed from my hand-written notes of the conversation and is correct and complete to the best of my recollection.

CONVERSATION

Ms. Casey is a regular passenger on board New York Waterways ferries that operate between Manhattan and New Jersey. She was one of eight passengers on the ferry *Port Imperial Manhattan* on November 17, 2000 when a fire broke out in the engine room.

Ms Casey boarded the *Port Imperial Manhattan* at New York Waterway's 38th Street ferry terminal in Manhattan intending to ride the vessel across the Hudson River to New Jersey. She boarded the vessel as usual and took a seat "in the middle of the boat about ½ way back." She said that the vessel proceeded out into the river and that she didn't notice anything out of the ordinary or see any smoke. After a short while, she noticed that the engines "sort of cut off." She said that the engines made the same kind of sound they make when the vessel is out in the middle of the river and they get to where they turn to go into the terminal. She

said its "like they kill the throttle." So she thought that the vessel had arrived at the point where we were about to make a turn.

About this time, which Ms. Casey estimated to be between 3 - 5 minutes after the vessel departed the terminal, one of the crew came down from "up top" with a fire extinguisher. According to Ms. Casey, he went to a "little electrical room or whatever it was" [the access door to the engineroom] in the aft section of the main deck cabin and started spraying the extinguisher onto a fire. A few minutes later, he asked the passengers to move to the front of the boat. Everyone walked outside on the bow, but it was really cold so Ms. Casey came back inside and sat right at the very front of the cabin. She sat there until it got smoky whereupon she too went outside onto the bow of the vessel.

Ms. Casey stated that when the passengers first began standing out on the foredeck, another ferryboat came by. She said that the *Manhattan* "blew the horn" to attract its attention and that the passengers we were yelling to them. She said that the other ferryboat slowed down, but kept going. She said that the passengers all thought this was very strange.

The crewmen were still trying to put out the fire. Meanwhile the passengers began talking among themselves. She said that they were wondering out loud if anyone had called "9-11," if they needed to get life jackets, and how they were going to "get out of this." Ms. Casey had a discussion with another passenger in which she mentioned that she recalled seeing life jackets in the "back of the boat." This passenger said that he was going to go back inside and try to get life jackets. And this passenger went back in to get life jackets for everyone. He returned several minutes later with a mixed assortment of different size life jackets, some for small children. It was "very, very smoky" when he came out. Shortly after he came back out on deck, the crew had to close off the cabin from further entry.

Ms. Casey said that the passengers did not know if 9-11 had been called. "Nobody was telling us anything." Ms. Casey said that one passenger tried to call "9-11" and that no one answered. Ms. Casey then called "9-11" on her own cellular telephone. Ms. Casey stayed on the phone with 9-11 operator for most of the time until they were rescued. The 9-11 operator was asking where they were, and then the fire department got on the phone and asked some "irrelevant questions."

Ms. Casey said that the people she spoke with on the 9-11 line didn't seem to understand that she was in a boat that was on fire in the water. She does not think that the 911 people were prepared to handle that type of an accident. The 911 operator got the fire department on the line. The FD asked, "Where are you located, Ma'am?" She said that she responded, "I'm in the Hudson River." To which, the FD told her, "I need a street address." She repeated, "I'm in the Hudson River. I'm floating along. Its pitch black, dark out here." Ms. Casey said that she had just moved to New York and was not familiar with what the city looked like from the water and therefore she was not able to give the fire department a street

address. She said that somebody said, "We're close to Chelsea Piers." So she reported that to the fire department. She said that she was asked "Which way are you floating?" "What's the name of the boat?" She said that she became frustrated with these questions, which she viewed as irrelevant and screamed, "We're the only boat in the Hudson River that has flames and huge billows of smoke coming out of it! Just look at the Hudson River between Manhattan and Hoboken, we're the only boat out there on fire!"

It seemed to Ms. Casey that no one was prepared to respond to a fire on the river. They told Ms. Casey that the Coast Guard had seen them and was on its way to "get" them. Ms. Casey told the other passengers that "I'm on the phone with 9-11. They've located us. The Coast Guard is on their way." A crewmember responded "You called 9-11?" He seemed "kind of surprised" that we had. She said that the crew seemed to be trying their hardest to put the fire out. She said that they did not appear to her to be "incompetent" but that it seemed like they had not been trained.

There was a boat alongside the *Manhattan* which shown its light on them. And then another rescue boat came up but it had a tall bow and there was really no way that the passengers could have gotten from the ferry boat into this boat.

The next thing Ms. Casey recalled was that another ferryboat began to approach the *Manhattan*. And the rescue boat "kind of called the ferryboat off." About that time, an explosion erupted on the vessel somewhere in the main cabin. The passengers began yelling, "Are you crazy?" It seemed obvious that the quickest way to get the people off was to let the two ferryboats come up beside each other because they both had "flat bows". And the passengers were upset that the rescue boat had apparently told the approaching ferry to back away.

At one point, Ms. Casey said, there were three other boats in the immediate area of the *Manhattan*, but she added, "nobody was coming in to do anything." She said that none of these boats put fire hoses on the fire while the passengers were on board the *Manhattan*. She said the Coast Guard boat stood by and watched. The emergency boat came up close to the *Manhattan* "to kind of like see what was going on." She said that the emergency boat had a bullhorn that was used to tell the other ferryboat first to back off, and then to come forward. And it seemed to Ms. Casey that the ferryboat did not understand what the emergency boat wanted them to do and kept backing away. She said that it seemed like a "psych out" to her - First it seemed like they were going to get saved and then the boat backed away. Then it seemed to her that they weren't going to be saved and that the passengers were either going to have to jump into the water or "stand there and blow up."

According to Ms. Casey, there was a lot of confusion about directing the ferryboat away and then in bringing it back. During this time, the people on the *Manhattan* put one of the life floats into the water because they were thinking that was going to be the only way off the boat. Further, since they did not know what

had caused the explosion, they feared that there might be more explosions coming. Finally, the ferryboat came back up to the *Manhattan* and we all "jumped over."

Ms. Casey said that the gap between the two ferries was not very great. She said that she only had to take "a little leap" to reach the other vessel. She couldn't estimate distance, but said they were close enough that she was not concerned about being able to make it safely. The *Manhattan* crewmembers stood by to assist passengers cross over to the other ferry.

Ms. Casey said that there were not enough life vests for all the passengers and that one passenger was wearing a vest that belonged to the crew. The person who helped Ms. Casey across to the other ferryboat was wearing a crew life vest and she had thought at the time that he was a crewman. Later, after they got across to the other boat, he started to take off the vest, and he said, "Oh, I have to give this back." Casey said, "What do you mean?" He said, "I don't work for the ferries. They gave this to me because there weren't enough life vests."

Ms. Casey thinks there were enough life vests on board the *Manhattan* but that they were inaccessible because they were located in the main cabin, which was full of smoke and darkness. She said that the passenger who had gone into the cabin to get life preservers was only able to find about 5 adult and 3 children size life preservers because of the heavy smoke and because of the conditions of darkness due to the power failure.

Ms. Casey said that she was not injured in the fire.

Once on board the other ferryboat, Ms. Casey and the other passengers were taken to the ferry terminal located at Port Imperial, New Jersey [Weehawken]. From there, she went back to Lincoln Harbor because Lincoln Harbor was where she was headed when she had got on the *Manhattan* in the first place.

Ms. Casey stated that the crew was trying "their hardest" to put the fire out. She thought that extinguishing the fire was the crew's "primary focus." She does not think that the crew had been properly trained in passenger emergency evacuation procedures. She felt that she was more or less left to her own devices by the crew. She said she called 9-11 and the other passenger got the life jackets, and two passengers assisted in getting the life floats down – functions that she believes the crew should have performed. She stated, "We very much lead in taking care of ourselves."

According to Ms. Casey, the crews on New York Waterways ferries never make safety briefing announcements "like they do on airplanes." She said that the crew of the *Manhattan* never made an announcement concerning where to get life jackets in an emergency. In Ms. Casey's opinion, at the time that the crewman first tried to put out the fire and asked the passengers to move to the "front of the boat," somebody should have said, "Please locate a life jacket and move to the front of the

boat." She said that the lights were still "on" in the cabin and it had not yet gotten "too smoky".

According to Ms. Casey, after the explosion occurred, "We all began to panic a little bit." She said that they were standing on the front portion of the vessel and that the cabin was "completely closed off" so that they had no where else to go. Then something exploded in the after part of the boat and that the passengers were worried it was a fuel tank. She said that a lot of flames and smoke began coming out of the cabin at that time and that the passengers started to panic. She said that there was talk among passengers at this time of getting into the water.

Ms. Casey stated that taking the life floats down to the main deck from their stowed position on top of the wheelhouse was a very haphazard process. She said, "You could tell that the crew had probably never dragged those life rafts down before." She did not think that anyone had ever even considered how the life floats were going to be deployed over the rail and into the water while still maintaining hold of them so that they didn't drift away. Further, she did not think that the crew had any idea how to get people from the deck of the boat to the life float in the water.

According to Ms. Casey, the first raft was being thrown overboard when someone yelled, "Wait, wait, we have to have the rope." She said that they almost threw the life float into the water without having a line on it. She further stated that once the life float was in the water, everyone realized, that's "really far down. At that point, Ms. Casey said she was thinking, "I don't know if this life raft is going to work." She was comforted somewhat by the idea that at least she had her life jacket. She removed her backpack and was getting ready to get into the water. She says they were all thinking, "We're going in the water." She saw that the life floats [which 'were like a big inner tube with a mesh bottom'] would not keep them out of the water and she realized that whether or not they used the life floats, they were going to be in the water. Ms. Casey stated that she can swim, but that she doesn't swim a lot. Ms. Casey expressed her opinion that it would have been a "huge fiasco" if the fire had broken out on board a ferryboat from Port Imperial, which typically carry many more passengers at one time. She said that the boats like the *Manhattan* that operate from Lincoln Harbor carry much fewer passengers because they provide a service mainly to the residents and business people in Lincoln Harbor to go back and forth from "the city." She stated that she felt it was lucky there were only 8 passengers on board the *Manhattan* when the fire broke out because there would have been no where for the passengers to go if there had been 200 people on board. She said that even with the eight passengers and the few crewmembers on board, the bow was "pretty crowded." If there had been 200 people on board, she said, people would have had to go into the water because there would have been no where for them to stand.

Ms. Casey made the following recommendations to improve passenger safety on board New York Waterway ferries:

1. Standard safety announcements should be made for every trip. People need to be told where the life jackets are located and need to be given standard instructions regarding emergency procedures. She suggested wording such as, "If there is an emergency, locate a life jacket and proceed to the front of the boat."
2. Update the life vests and emergency equipment. Ms. Casey stated that one passenger couldn't get his life jacket on. He couldn't figure out how to do it. The straps were "all bound around it" and it had one of those little metal clips that probably had never been opened. She said it was almost "rusted closed." Ms. Casey said that assisted this passenger in donning the life jacket. She said that she took the strap, wrapped it around the passenger and tied it on him. Further, Ms. Casey expressed that she had no confidence in the utility of the life floats as a piece of survival gear. She said that she had as much faith in her life preserver and her own swimming ability as she had in the life floats.
3. The crews need to be trained on what to do in case of an emergency. According to Ms. Casey, the crew of the *Manhattan* seemed to be trained on how to fight a fire, but they did not know how to take care of the passengers during an emergency. She thinks that maybe the passengers had too much confidence in the ability of the crew to keep them safe. She said that there were no announcements and she thinks that they all felt that, "if we needed a life jacket, somebody would have told us." She thinks that someone who was "in charge" should have told the passengers that they needed to get a life jacket. She said that there were no announcements made at all.

She stated that typically when one comes on board a New York Waterway ferry, "you just walk inside and sit down." She said that no one in the crew says anything to you. She said there is a little sign on most of the boats that says life jackets are located under your seat. She said that she noticed the sign because, since the fire, every time she goes on board a ferry she checks to see where the life jackets are. Ms. Casey stated that she did not recall seeing a sign on the *Manhattan* showing where life jackets were stowed.

END OF INTERVIEW

Donald J. Tyrrell
Investigator-in-Charge